



LIFE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOME OF THE ANCIENT EMINENT CHRISTIAN LEADERS AND WRITERS – JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, DIODORE OF TARSUS, THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA AND CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

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I. St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407)

Saint John Chrysostom (c.347– c.407), archbishop of Constantinople, was an important early father of the church. He is known for his eloquence in preaching and public speaking. After his death, he was given the Greek surname Chrysostomos, meaning "Golden mouthed",¹ rendered in English as Chrysostom. The Orthodox Church and Eastern Catholic Churches honour him as a saint (feast days: November 13 and January 27) and count him among the Three Holy Hierarchs together with Saints Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian. He is recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as a saint and a Doctor of the Church. John surname "Chrysostom" occurs for the first time in the "Constitution" of Pope Vigilius in the year 553 is generally considered the most prominent doctor of the Greek Church and the greatest preacher ever heard in a Christian pulpit. Chrysostom is known within Christianity chiefly as a preacher, theologian and liturgist, particularly in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Outside the Christian tradition Chrysostom is noted for eight of his sermons which played a considerable part in the history of Christian anti-Semitism, and were extensively misused by the Nazis in their ideological campaign against the Jews.

1. Life

1.1 Early life and education

At the time of Chrysostom's birth, Antioch was the second city of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. John Chrysostom was born in Antioch in c.347. Different scholars describe his mother Anthusa as a pagan or as a Christian, and his father was a high ranking military officer. His father, Secundus died soon after his birth and he was raised by his mother. Fortunately she was a woman of intelligence and character. She not only instructed her son in piety, but also sent him to the best schools of Antioch, though with regard to morals and religion many objections could be urged against them. John began his education under the pagan teacher Libanius. From him John acquired the skills for a career in rhetoric, as well as a love of the Greek language and literature. As he grew older, however, he became more deeply committed to Christianity and went on to study theology under Diodore of Tarsus (founder of the re-constituted School of Antioch).² According to the Christian historian Sozomen, Libanius was supposed to have said on his deathbed that John would have been his successor "if the Christians had not taken him from us".

It was a very decisive turning-point in the life of Chrysostom when he met one day in 367 the bishop Meletius. The earnest, mild, and winning character of this man captivated Chrysostom in such a measure that he soon began to withdraw from classical and profane studies and to devote himself to an ascetic and religious life. He studied Holy Scripture and frequented the sermons of Meletius. In 372, he received Holy Baptism and was ordained reader at the age of 23. After baptism in he pursued biblical and ascetic studies under the spiritual direction of Carterius and especially of the famous Diodorus, later Bishop of Tarsus. Prayer, manual labour and the study of Holy Scripture were his chief occupations, and suppose that his first literary works date from this time, for nearly all his earlier writings deal with ascetic and monastic subjects. He lived with extreme asceticism (AD 374-381) and became a hermit c. 375, where his self imposed regime was so harsh that it damaged his health. Therefore, his poor health forced him to return to Antioch.³

1.2 Priesthood and service in Antioch

He was ordained as a deacon in 381 by Meletius of Antioch, and was ordained as a presbyter in 386 by Bishop Flavian I of Antioch. Over the course of twelve years (386-98), he gained popularity because of the eloquence of his public speaking, especially his insightful expositions of Bible passages and moral teaching. The most valuable of his works from this period are his Homilies on various books of the Bible. He composed his most famous book, "On the Priesthood", towards the end of 386.⁴ In Lent of 387; he delivered his sermons "On the Statues". He emphasised charitable giving and was concerned with the spiritual and temporal needs of the poor. He also spoke out against abuse of wealth and personal property. He says, "Wealth was God-given. How they enjoy so many acres, while your neighbour has not a spoonful of earth".⁵ His straightforward preaching helped Chrysostom to garner popular support. He led many Christians to repentance, calmed the fears of the citizens and brought large numbers of non Christians into the church.⁶ He founded a series of hospitals in Constantinople to

care for the poor.

1.3 Archbishop of Constantinople (AD 398-404)

In A.D 398, February 26, he was elected bishop of Constantinople. The first act of the new bishop was to bring about reconciliation between Flavian and Rome. Constantinople itself soon began to feel the impulse of a new ecclesiastical life. During his time as Archbishop he adamantly refused to host lavish social gatherings; he would have no pomp, luxury or grandeur; he sold the Episcopal plate and ornaments for the benefit of the poor; which made him popular with the common people, but unpopular with wealthy citizens. Some clergies practiced adultery and 'spiritual sisters'. The monks were wandering about too freely and had to be restrained. They were censured and even deposed. He forbade the clergy's participation in the night vigil singing as a counter-attraction to the Arians.⁷

His time in Constantinople was more tumultuous than his time in Antioch. Theophilus, the Patriarch of Alexandria, wanted to bring Constantinople under his sway and opposed John's appointment to Constantinople. Being an opponent of Origen's teachings, he accused John of being too partial to the teachings of that theologian. He made another enemy in Aelia Eudoxia, the wife of the eastern Emperor Arcadius. They held a synod in 403 to charge John, in which his connection to Origen was used against him.⁸ It resulted in his deposition and banishment. He was called back by Arcadius. Peace was short-lived. A silver statue of Eudoxia was erected near his cathedral, John denounced this ceremonies. He spoke against her in harsh terms.⁹ In 404, by the Synod of the Oak; he was further exiled to Pitiunt (Abkhazia region of Georgia) where his tomb is the shrine for pilgrims. He never reached this destination, as he died during the journey. He died in exile in September 407. He was buried at Comana. On 27 January, 438, his body was translated to Constantinople with great pomp, and entombed in the church of the Apostles where Eudoxia had been buried in the year 404.

2. Writings

Chrysostom has deserved a place in ecclesiastical history, not simply as Bishop of Constantinople, but chiefly as a Doctor of the Church. Of none of the other Greek Fathers do we possess so many writings. We may divide them into three portions, the "homilies", the "treatise", and the "letters".

1. Among the "homilies" we have to distinguish commentaries on books of Holy Scripture, groups of homilies (sermons) on special subjects, and a great number of single homilies. (a) The chief "commentaries" on the Old Testament are the sixty-seven homilies "On Genesis" (with eight sermons on Genesis); fifty-nine homilies "On the Psalms" (4-12, 41, 43-49, 108-117, 119-150), a commentary on the first chapters of "Isaiah", the fragments on Job are spurious.¹⁰ The chief commentaries on the New Testament are first the ninety homilies on "St. Matthew"¹¹ (c. 390); eighty-eight homilies on "St. John" (c. 389);¹² fifty-five homilies on "the Acts"; 13 and homilies "On all Epistles of St. Paul."¹³ The best and most important commentaries are those on the Psalms, on St. Matthew, and on the Epistle to the Romans (c. 391). The thirty-four homilies on the Epistle to the Galatians also very probably come to us from the hand of a second editor. (b) Among the "homilies forming connected groups", we may especially mention the five homilies "On Anna"; three "On David"; six "On Ozias"; eight "Against the Jews"; and the seven famous homilies "On St. Paul". (c) A great number of "single homilies" deal with moral subjects, with certain feasts or saints. One of the recurring features of John's sermons is his emphasis on care for the needy.¹⁴
2. Outside of his sermons, a number of John's other treatises have had a lasting influence. One such work is John's early treatise *Against Those Who Oppose the Monastic Life*, written while he was a deacon (sometime before 386), which was directed to parents, pagan as well as Christian, whose sons were contemplating a monastic vocation. The book is a sharp attack on the values of Antiochene upper-class urban society written by someone who was a member of that class. Chrysostom also writes that, already in his day, it was customary for Antiochenes to send their sons to be educated by monks. His early work 'On the Priesthood' is a finely conceived description of the responsibility of the Christian minister.¹⁵
3. Best known of 236 letters are two to Pope Innocent I and seventeen letters

to the deaconess Olympias. The rest addressed to more than 100 persons, give an intimate picture of the exile. The most important spurious work in Latin is the "Opus imperfectum", written by an Arian in the first half of the fifth century.¹⁶

3. Other Teachings:

Chrysostom explicitly acknowledges as a rule of faith tradition, as laid down by the authoritative teaching of the Church. This Church, he says, is but one, by the unity of her doctrine; she is spread over the whole world; she is the one Bride of Christ. As to Christology, Chrysostom holds clearly that Christ is God and man in one person, but he never enters into deeper examination of the manner of this union. Of great importance is his doctrine regarding the Eucharist. There cannot be the slightest doubt that he teaches the Real Presence, and his expressions on the change wrought by the words of the priest are equivalent to the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Beyond his preaching, the other lasting legacy of John is his influence on Christian liturgy. Two of his writings are particularly notable. He harmonized the liturgical life of the Church by revising the prayers and rubrics of the Divine Liturgy, or celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Chrysostom's liturgical legacy has inspired several musical compositions.¹⁷

4. Theological Importance of Chrysostom

4.1 Chrysostom as Orator: The success of Chrysostom's preaching is chiefly due to his great natural facility of speech, to the abundance of his thoughts as well as the popular way of presenting and illustrating them. He ordinarily preferred moral subjects, and very seldom in his sermons followed a regular plan. In this way, he is by no means a model for our modern thematic preaching.

4.2 Chrysostom as an exegete: As an exegete Chrysostom is of the highest importance, for he is the chief and almost the only successful representative of the exegetical principles of the School of Antioch. Diodorus of Tarsus had initiated him into the grammatico-historical method of that school, which was in strong opposition to the eccentric, allegorical, and mystical interpretation of Origen and the Alexandrian School.

4.3 Chrysostom as Dogmatic Theologian: As has already been said, Chrysostom's was not a speculative mind, nor was he involved in his lifetime in great dogmatic controversies. Nevertheless it would be a mistake to underrate the great theological treasures hidden in his writings. From the very first he was considered by the Greeks and Latins as a most important witness to the Faith. Even at the Council of Ephesus (431) both parties, St. Cyril and the Antiochians, already invoked him on behalf of their opinions, and at the Seventh Ecumenical Council, when a passage of Chrysostom had been read in favour of the veneration of images, Bishop Peter of Nicomedia cried out: "If John Chrysostom speaks in the way of the images, who would dare to speak against them?" which shows clearly the progress his authority had made up to that date.¹⁸

Conclusion

He was an excellent preacher. As a theologian, he has been and continues to be very important in Eastern Christianity, and is generally considered the most prominent doctor of the Greek Church, but has been less important to Western Christianity. His writings have survived to the present day more so than any of the other Greek Fathers. [1] He rejected the contemporary trend for allegory, instead speaking plainly and applying Bible passages and lessons to everyday life. His exiles demonstrated that secular powers dominated the Eastern Church at this period in history. It also demonstrated the rivalry between Constantinople and Alexandria for recognition as the pre-eminent Eastern See.

II. Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350 - 428)

Theodore the Interpreter (ca. 350 - 428), was bishop of Mopsuestia, a city in what is now Turkey which has since declined into a village which is now known as Yakapinar, from 392 to 428. He is also known as Theodore of Antioch, from the place of his birth and presbyterate. He is the best known representative of the middle Antiochene School of hermeneutics.

1. Life and work

Theodore of Mopsuestia was born in Antioch, A.D. 350, where his father held an official position and the family was wealthy. His brother Polychronius became bishop of the Metropolitan see of Apamea. Theodore first appears as the early companion and friend of Chrysostom and but two or three years his senior in age. Together with their common friend Maximus, he enjoyed a philosophical education. The clever and highly gifted youth received the education in classical literature usual to his station and studied philosophy and rhetoric in the school of the renowned pagan rhetorician Libanius. When Chrysostom himself had been converted to the monastic life of Basil of Caesarea, he likewise converted Maximus and Theodore. He had been previously baptized before taking up monastic vows. Yet from the writings of Chrysostom it is clear he found joy in ascetic self-discipline, and he had just assumed a celibate life. Chrysostom's connection with Diodore was probably broken off in 374, when he plunged into a more complete monastic seclusion; Theodore's seems to have continued until the elevation of Diodore to the see of Tarsus in 378.¹⁹

During this period doubtless the foundations were laid of Theodore's understand-

ing of the Bible and ecclesiastical doctrine. His peculiar views of the Person of Christ help him to lead by his antagonism against Apollinaris of Laodicea. The latter years of this decade witnessed Theodore's first appearance as a writer. He was ordained priest at Antioch in 383, in his thirty-third year, the ordaining bishop being doubtless Flavian. Theodore's great treatise on the Incarnation belongs to this period. In 392, he was consecrated to the see of Mopsuestia on the death of Olympius, probably through the influence of Diodore.²⁰ He spent his remaining thirty-six years of life in this town.

Mopsuestia was a free town; city of the second province of Cilicia on the Pyramus river, between Tarsus and Issus, at present day Misis. Its name means hearth of Mopsos, a legendary seer who was believed to have been its founder.²¹ Theodore's long episcopate was marked by no striking incidents. In 394 he attended a synod at Constantinople on a question which concerned the see of Bostra in the patriarchate of Antioch. While there, Theodore had the opportunity to preach before the emperor Theodosius I, the sermon made a deep impression, and emperor, who had sat at the feet of Ambrose and Gregory Nazianzus, declared that he had never met with such a teacher. Another glimpse of Theodore's Episcopal life is supplied by a letter of Chrysostom to him from Cucusus (AD 404-407). Like many figures in the early Church, Theodore was a universalist, believing that all people would eventually be saved. Ibas of Edessa that praised Theodore "as a Herald of truth and doctor of the Church".²²

During his lifetime, Theodore was considered an orthodox Christian thinker and even after he had been anathematized for Nestorianism his Universalism was not stigmatized. In his confession of faith he wrote that Christ "will restore us all into communion with himself". Theodore worked zealously for the good of his diocese. He struggled against extinguished Arianism and other heresies in Mopsuestia. Several of his works are doubtless monuments of these pastoral labours, e.g. the catechetical lectures, and the treatise on "Persian Magic." Yet his Episcopal work was by no means simply that of a diocesan bishop.

Theodore's last years were complicated by two controversies. When in 418 the Pelagian leaders were deposed and exiled from the West, they sought in the East the sympathy of the chief living representative of the school of Antioch. Theodore with having turned against Julian as soon as the latter had left Mopsuestia, and anathematized him in a provincial synod. A greater heresiarch than Julian visited Mopsuestia in the last year of his life. It is stated that Nestorius, on his way from Antioch to Constantinople (AD 428), took counsel with Theodore and received from him the seeds of heresy which he shortly afterwards scattered with such disastrous results. Towards the close of 428, Theodore died at the age of seventy-eight, the storm was gathering, but did not break until after his death.²³

The council of Ephesus, however, while it condemned Nestorius by name, contented itself with condemning Theodore's creed without mentioning Theodore. This circumstance deepened the mistrust of the orthodox, and even in the East there were some who proceeded to condemn the teaching of Theodore. Hesychius of Jerusalem attacked him around 435 in his Ecclesiastical History; Rabbula, bishop of Edessa, who at Ephesus had sided with John of Antioch, now publicly anathematized Theodore.²⁴

1. Writings

Nestorian writers of the 13th and 14th centuries provide the best available lists of Theodore's works. While most of his writings are not extant, fragments of such works as Commentary on the Minor Prophets and Disputation with Macedonians still exist. His Commentary on the Minor Prophets shows similar insistence on the historical situation envisioned by each prophet. It is noteworthy for its independence of earlier hermeneutical authorities and Theodore's reluctance to admit a Christological reference. It is marked a considerable monument of his expository power, and the best illustration we possess of the Antiochene method of interpreting Old Testament prophecy.²⁵

His commentaries on the rest of the Bible have survived only in quotations and excerpts. Perhaps most notable of these is his commentary on Genesis, which is cited by Cosmas Indicopleustes. Of his other exegetical writings, we possess the greater part of his commentary on the psalms, fragments of his commentary on Genesis, a Syriac version of his commentary on St. John's Gospel, and Latin version of his commentary on the minor Epistle of St. Paul. Besides pieces of his commentaries on books from the Old and New Testament, there was his treatise in fifteen books, on the Incarnation. It was directed against the Apollinarians and Eunomians. Photius mentions that Theodore wrote three books on "Persian Magic", which not only attacked Zoroastrianism, but also betrayed his "Nestorian" views in the third book, and defended belief in the final restoration of all men. Lastly, Theodore wrote a portion of a liturgy; "not content with drafting a new creed, he sought to impose upon the church a new Anaphora". M. Richard argued that the compilers to misrepresented Theodore's thought that their extracts are completely unreliable as a basis for a judgement on his doctrine.²⁶

3. Christology

Theodore's Christology exercised a more direct and eventful influence on the doctrine of his disciple Nestorius. He was accustomed to speak of two Sons united in some undefined way in one person, he thought and taught of conjunction of the two natures in Christ., rather than of a union, which was the term used by orthodox teachers.²⁷ Theodore's central thesis was that the redemption of humanity

depends on the perfection and obedience of Christ as man. Jesus' identity with God consisted in the 'loving accord' between his will and the Father's. Theodore was anxious to safeguard the reality of Christ's humanity which he rightly saw to be prejudiced by Apollinarianism. He says that the union of God and man in Christ to form a single person (prosopon) in no sense destroys or qualifies the permanent duality of the two uniting 'natures'.²⁸ The contemporary polemics against Arianism and Apollinarianism led the Antiochenes to emphasize energetically the perfect Divinity and the unimpaired Humanity of Christ, and to separate as sharply as possible the two natures.

The union of two natures started in the womb of Mary. In it the logos connected himself with a perfect man in a mysterious way. By the grace of god Jesus increased in perfection. In this way, he said, there is one person in Jesus, but the natures are not mixed. The divine nature does not change the human nature in its essence. Jesus had a human nature which by grace could follow the divine natures. Thus, in a sermon which he delivered at Antioch Theodore vehemently attacked the use of the term Theotokos, because Mary was strictly speaking anthropotokos, and only indirectly Theotokos. It cannot indeed be denied that the Antiochene separation of the natures must result in an improper weakening of the union in Christ. Like Nestorius, Theodore expressly declares that Mary also gave birth to a man, the other that, Mary gave birth to God, because the body of Jesus was united with the Logos of God. Thus, according to Theodore, His actual freedom from sin would be the result of His physical union with God, not a merit of His free will. The two natures form a unity, "like man and wife" or "body and soul".²⁹

At Constantinople, the Fifth General Synod (553), Theodore's writings and person, were placed under anathema. He died in 428, the year in which Nestorius succeeded to the Episcopal See of Constantinople.

Conclusion

During his lifetime Theodore was always regarded as orthodox and as a prominent ecclesiastical author, and was even consulted by distant bishops on theological questions. He ranked next to Origen in the esteem of the ancient church. For nearly fifty years he maintained the cause of the church in controversy with various classes of assailants, and throughout his life his orthodoxy was regarded as unimpeachable. He was bishop for thirty-six years, and died full of honours; but after he had been in his grave a hundred and twenty-five years, the church had become so corrupted by heathenism that it condemned him for heresy. He was anathematized for Nestorianism, but his Universalism was not stigmatized.

III Diodore of Tarsus (c. 330 - 390)

Diodore of Tarsus (ca. 330 - 390) was a Christian bishop, a monastic reformer, and a theologian. A strong supporter of the orthodoxy of Nicaea, Diodore played a pivotal role in the Council of Constantinople and opposed the anti-Christian policies of Julian the Apostate. Diodore founded one of the most influential centres of Christian thought in the early church, and many of his students become notable theologians in their own right. Like many early Church Fathers, Diodore was a Christian Universalist.

1. Early life

Diodore was born in the first quarter of the 4th century in Antioch or Tarsus (Cilicia) of a distinguished family. He received a classic philosophical education at the school of Athens under the Pagan rhetor Libanius, and became a leader in the school of Antioch. During this period, Diodore's work focused on philosophical treatises and opposing Emperor Julian's attempts to restore paganism in the empire. When an Arian named Leontius was made bishop of Antioch, Diodore and his friend Flavian (who later was himself appointed as bishop of Antioch) organized those who followed the Nicene orthodoxy outside the walls of the city for worship. During his time at the monastery in Antioch, Diodore came under the tutelage of Meletius, a theologian opposed to the Arian tendencies of the era and a strong support of the Nicene factions of the church. In 360, the church in Antioch split into factions, having two Nicene and two Arian bishops. Meletius was one of the Nicene bishops of Antioch in 360, and it was he that ordained Diodore as a priest. Diodore, in turn, was a strong supporter not only of the Nicene cause but of Meletius.³⁰

2. Priesthood

During his priesthood, Diodore founded a monastery and catechetical school near the city of Antioch. It was through this school that Diodore became the mentor of the controversial theologian and liturgist Theodore of Mopsuestia, but also of the legendary homilicist John Chrysostom. This school would give rise to the unique Antiochene perspectives on both biblical interpretation and Christology known as the Antiochene School. Ultimately, taken to the extreme, the perspective set out for this school by Diodore led to the teachings of Nestorius, which were first condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. It was his role as the head of the Antiochene School which led to Diodore's exile in 372. Banished to Armenia by Emperor Valens, Diodore encountered a fellow supporter of the Nicene faction, Basil of Caesarea, during his exile. When Diodore returned from exile following the death of the emperor in 378, Basil was serving as the patriarch of Caesarea, and he appointed Diodore as the bishop of Tarsus.³¹

3. Episcopate

As bishop of the see of Tarsus, Diodore continued to speak out for the Nicene

understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine in the person of Jesus Christ. He actively opposed both the Arianism and the Apollinarianism of his day (Arius taught that Jesus Christ was not fully divine, Apollinaris of Laodicea that he was not fully human). Diodore played key roles in both the local Council of Antioch in 379 and the ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381. When their mentor Meletius died in 381, Diodore recommended his friend Flavian as his successor, thus prolonging the division in the Antiochene church. He was teacher of two of the outstanding leaders - Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom. The date of Diodore's death is to be placed before 392-394. The Christology of Diodore was condemned as Nestorian at the local synod in Constantinople in 499.³² Diodore was seen as someone who supported the orthodoxy of Nicaea, and in his official decree ratifying the actions of the First Council of Constantinople, Emperor Theodosius I described Diodore as a "champion of the faith."³³

4. Writings

As a result of documents condemnation in 499 only a few fragments of his writings have survived in Nestorian anthologies. Photius judgement that documents was learned and scholar is confirmed by the lengthy ancient lists of his works. Named there are: A) dogmatic and Polemical- Apologetic works against pagans, Jews and heretics (Arius, Manichees, against Photinus, Malchior, Sabellius, Marcellus of Ancyra). B) Commentaries on all the books of the OT, the Gospels, Romans and I John. The work *Tis diaphora theorias* allegories evidently dealt with hermeneutical questions. C) Of documents cosmological – astronomical and chronological writings, the treatise is a reference to stoic and peripatetic thought. The title *Kata Aristotelous peri Somatos ouraniou* attests to documents debate with Aristotle.³⁴

5. Theology

He takes his position in dogma, against the Arian, against whom he stresses the full divinity of Christ, against the Apollinarists against whom he emphasizes the full humanity of Christ. Christ is also son of David; Mary is also 'Anthropotokos'. The result is a strict separation of the two nature of Christ. He started the founder of the Antiochene School of exegesis against Alexandrian allegorical interpretation, he taught a literal- historical understanding of the Bible text. He wanted to interpret the incarnation as no more than a supreme instance of inspiration and grace.³⁵ The resurrection, therefore, is regarded as a blessing not only to the good, but also to the evil. Diodore believed that God's mercy would punish the wicked less than their sins deserved, inasmuch as his mercy gave the good more than they deserved and he denied that God would bestow immortality for the purpose of prolonging or perpetuating suffering. In Diodore's view this epithet was only tolerable theology if one also added that Mary was "mother of man".³⁶

Conclusion

Diodore emphasized the humanity of Christ, tending to make the incarnation nothing more than a supreme instance of inspiration and grace. Cyril of Alexandria tried to have his writings condemned, but the official condemnation did not come until 499. Diodore courageously defended Christ's divinity against Julian the Apostate, the Roman emperor who attempted to revive paganism, and in his lifetime was regarded as a pillar of orthodoxy.

IV. Cyril of Alexandria (c. 378 - 444)

Saint Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 378 - ca. 444) was the Pope of Alexandria when the city was at its height in influence and power within the Roman Empire. Cyril wrote extensively and was a leading protagonist in the Christological controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries. He was a central figure in the First Council of Ephesus in 431. Cyril is among the patristic fathers, and the Doctors of the Church, and his reputation within the Christian world has resulted in his titles "Pillar of Faith" and "Seal of all the Fathers".

1. Early life

St. Cyril of Alexandria was born at Alexandria about 378. He was nephew of the patriarch of that city, Theophilus. Cyril received a classical and theological education at Alexandria and was ordained by his uncle, Theophilus. Of the early career of Cyril we know for certain only that in 403 he accompanied Theophilus to Constantinople to the "Synod of the Oak" at which St. John Chrysostom was deposed. He succeeded Theophilus as bishop of Alexandria on Theophilus' death in 412. Cyril then became spokesman in the controversy with Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople since 428. Nestorius intervened in an argument about the proper rendition of Mary's position in relation to Christ by renouncing both the terms "mother of man" and "mother of God" (Theotokos) as improper, suggesting "mother of Christ (Christotokos)" instead. Cyril had sent two letters to Nestorius for the explanations.

Cyril and the Alexandrian party crossed swords with those of the Antiochene party in the imperial home court. Finally, Emperor Theodosius II convoked a council to Ephesus to solve the dispute. Ephesus was friendly to Cyril, and after the Council of 431, Nestorius being removed from office and sent into exile. During the rest of his life, Cyril wrote treatises that clarified the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation and that helped prevent Nestorianism and Pelagianism from Christian community. He died on the 9th or the 27th of June, 444, after an episcopate of nearly thirty-two years, but the controversies were to continue for decades, from the Robber Council of Ephesus in 449 to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and beyond. His feast day is June 27th.³⁷

2. His writings

Cyril was a man of great courage and force of character. He was a scholarly archbishop and a prolific writer. He was the most brilliant theologian of the Alexandrian tradition. His writings are characterized by accurate thinking, precise exposition, and great reasoning skills. Among his writings are commentaries on John, Luke, and the Pentateuch, treatises on dogmatic theology, and Apologia against Julian the Apostate, and letters and sermons.³⁸ He was declared a doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIII in 1882.

He was the supporter of Alexandrian allegorical exegesis. His exegesis has been described as "Christo-centric". His work is practical-religious exhortations. His explanations of scripture have for its purpose to defend the orthodox faith. In the early years of his active life in the Church he wrote several exegeses. Among these were: Commentaries on the Old Testament, Thesaurus, Discourse against Arians, Commentary on St. John's Gospel, and Dialogues on the Trinity. In 429 as the Christological controversies increased, his output of writings was that which his opponents could not match.³⁹

The exegetical works of St. Cyril are very numerous. The seventeen books "On Adoration in Spirit and in Truth" (between 412- 429) in which in dialogue from Cyril discusses the relationship of Christianity to the Law. The Glaphyra or "brilliant", Commentaries on Pentateuch are of the same nature. Long explanations of Isaiah and of the Minor Prophets give a mystical interpretation after the Alexandrian manner. The two treatises written in 423 by this he refuted the Nestorian teaching and accepted the Athanasian teaching. Only fragments are extant of other works on the Old Testament; Kings, Psalms, Canticle of Canticles, Proverbs, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel⁴⁰ as well as of expositions of Matthew, Luke, and some of the Epistles, but of that of St. Luke much is preserved in a Syriac version. Of Cyril's 156 homilies on Luke, only 3 have come to us directly. In this homilies on Luke are primarily pastoral instructions but also contain attack on the teaching of Nestorius. He wrote a Commentary on John in between 425-428.⁴¹

The earliest of Cyril's dogmatic and polemic works were directed against the Arians. The series of Anti-Nestorian polemics began with the five books against Nestorius composed in early 430. In the explanation of 12 anathematisms composed during his imprisonment in Ephesus in 431, he endeavoured to prove their accordance with scripture. Of St. Cyril's sermons and letters the most interesting are those which concern the Nestorian controversy. The main apologetic work dedicated to Theodosius II "In Defence of the Holy Christian Religion against the Books of the Godless Julian" was written in 435. The treatise "Contra Diodorum at Theodorum" composed in 438; the last work against the Nestorian Christological error is the dialogue "Quod unussit Christus". Among his theological treatises we have two large works and one small one on the Holy Trinity, and a number of treatises and tracts belonging to the Nestorian controversy. A good number of homilies have come down under Cyril's name. The 4th homily, which regarded as the most famous sermons on Mary from antiquity. 29 such writings have come down to us from 414-442. We have 100 letters from Cyril's correspondence.⁴²

3. Christology

His early writings do not formulate his theological teaching by simply following Athanasius.⁴³ Cyril's reputation rests upon his teaching about the person and saving work of Christ. Christ is for him the eternal son and Word of God, who has undertaken, without loss of his identity. He is God and man at once, united as body and soul are united without coalescence. Cyril regarded the embodiment of God in the person of Jesus Christ to be so mystically powerful that it spread out from the body of the God-man into the rest of the race, to reconstitute human nature into a graced and deified condition of the saints, one that promised immortality and transfiguration to believers.

Nestorius wanted to maintain a clear distinction between the divine and human natures in Christ, while Cyril argued that the divine and human had been united into one nature in Christ. Cyril's constant stress was on the simple idea that it was God who walked the streets of Nazareth (hence Mary was Theotokos - Mother of God), and God who had appeared in a transfigured humanity.⁴⁴ Cyril says that "The selfsame Jesus Christ exist first as begotten before all words from the father, and as a man is born of the virgin: on this account the Fathers are called Mary as Theotokos"⁴⁵. Nestorius spoke of the distinct 'Jesus the man' and 'the divine Logos'⁴⁶ in ways that Cyril thought were too dichotomous, widening the ontological gap between man and God in a way that would annihilate the person of Christ. The second letter of Cyril to Nestorius, sent early in 430 is one of the most important Christological documents of the early church.⁴⁷

The principal fame of St. Cyril rests upon his defence of Catholic doctrine against Nestorius. That heretic was undoubtedly confused and uncertain. He wished, against Apollinarius, to teach that Christ was a perfect man, and he took the denial of a human personality in Our Lord. The union of the human and the Divine natures was therefore to Nestorius an unspeakably close junction, but not a union in one hypostasis. St. Cyril taught the personal that the one Christ has two perfect and distinct natures, Divine and human. But he would not admit two physis in Christ, because he took physis to imply not merely a nature but a subsistent (i.e. personal) nature. Cyril never denies the real and complete humanity of Christ; but he does insist that the really existing humanity in Christ. He says

about "the one incarnate nature of the logos".⁴⁸

His opponents misrepresented him as teaching that the Divine person suffered, in His human nature; and he was constantly accused of Apollinarianism. On the other hand, after his death Monophysitism was founded upon a misinterpretation of his teaching. He brings out admirably the necessity of the full doctrine of the humanity to God, to explain the scheme of the redemption of man. He argues that the flesh of Christ is truly the flesh of God, in that it is life-giving in the Holy Eucharist.⁴⁹ In the richness and depth of his philosophical and devotional treatment of the Incarnation we recognize the disciple of Athanasius.

Conclusion

His writings and his theology have remained central to tradition of the Fathers and to all Orthodox to this day. Later on he has venerated in the Church. His letters, especially the second letter to Nestorius, were not only approved by the Council of Ephesus, but by many subsequent councils, and have frequently been appealed to as tests of orthodoxy. In the East he was always honoured as one of the greatest of the Doctors.

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